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Qualitative Exploration of Sustainability Narratives in Global Fashion Brands

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ABSTRACT

The global fashion industry is increasingly positioning sustainability at the centre of its strategic and communicative practices. However, the narratives used to communicate sustainability often reflect complex interactions between corporate intentions, stakeholder expectations, and market dynamics. This study provides a qualitative exploration of sustainability narratives in global fashion brands, drawing on secondary data sources such as sustainability reports, corporate websites, and marketing materials. Guided by legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis, the research examines how sustainability is constructed, framed, and communicated. The findings reveal that brands emphasise themes such as transparency, circularity, ethical labour practices, and consumer engagement, while frequently employing discursive strategies including storytelling, symbolic imagery, and ambiguous language. Despite evidence of substantive initiatives, sustainability narratives often incorporate symbolic elements that may contribute to perceptions of greenwashing. The study highlights the tension between authentic sustainability practices and strategic communication, underscoring the need for greater transparency and standardisation. The research contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced understanding of sustainability narratives and their implications for stakeholder trust and corporate legitimacy in the global fashion industry.

Keywords: sustainability narratives; fashion industry; corporate communication; greenwashing; stakeholder theory; legitimacy theory; discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades, evolving into a highly dynamic, consumer-driven, and globalised sector. While this expansion has generated economic growth and increased accessibility to fashion products, it has also intensified concerns regarding environmental degradation, resource depletion, and labour exploitation. The industry is widely recognised as one of the most environmentally damaging sectors, contributing substantially to greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, and textile waste (Niinimäki et al., 2020). At the same time, persistent reports of poor labour conditions in garment-producing regions have further amplified calls for ethical accountability (Bick et al., 2018).

In response to these growing concerns, sustainability has emerged as a central discourse within the fashion industry. Sustainability in this context encompasses a broad range of practices aimed at minimising environmental impact, ensuring fair labour conditions, and promoting long-term economic viability (Fletcher, 2014). However, beyond operational changes, sustainability has also become a critical component of corporate communication and brand identity. Fashion brands increasingly engage in constructing and disseminating sustainability narratives to position themselves as responsible and forward-thinking entities.

Sustainability narratives refer to the stories, messages, and discursive strategies that

organisations use to communicate their environmental and social commitments. These narratives are not merely descriptive but are inherently strategic, shaping stakeholder perceptions and influencing brand legitimacy (Boje, 2008). In the context of global fashion brands, sustainability narratives often emphasise themes such as ethical sourcing, eco-friendly materials, circular production models, and social responsibility initiatives. Through these narratives, brands attempt to align themselves with evolving societal values and consumer expectations.

The growing prominence of sustainability narratives can also be understood in light of increasing stakeholder pressure. Consumers, particularly younger generations, are becoming more conscious of the environmental and social implications of their purchasing decisions (McNeill & Moore, 2015). Additionally, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), regulatory bodies, and investors are demanding greater transparency and accountability from corporations. As a result, fashion brands are compelled not only to adopt sustainable practices but also to effectively communicate these efforts.

However, the rise of sustainability narratives has also given rise to critical concerns regarding authenticity and credibility. One of the most significant challenges is the phenomenon of greenwashing, where companies exaggerate or misrepresent their sustainability efforts to create a misleading impression (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In the fashion industry, greenwashing can manifest in various forms, such as vague claims,

selective disclosure, and the use of environmentally themed marketing without substantive changes in production processes. This raises important questions about the extent to which sustainability narratives reflect genuine commitment versus strategic image management.

Furthermore, sustainability narratives are shaped by complex discursive processes that involve language, symbolism, and cultural meanings. The way sustainability is framed can influence how it is understood and evaluated by stakeholders. For instance, the use of terms such as “eco-friendly” or “conscious” may evoke positive associations but often lack clear definitions, leading to ambiguity and potential misinterpretation (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Similarly, visual imagery, storytelling, and emotional appeals are frequently employed to enhance the persuasiveness of sustainability narratives.

Given these complexities, there is a need for in-depth qualitative research to explore how sustainability narratives are constructed and communicated in the fashion industry. While existing studies have examined sustainability practices and consumer behaviour, relatively less attention has been paid to the narrative and discursive dimensions of sustainability communication. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness and integrity of corporate sustainability efforts.

This study aims to address this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of sustainability narratives in global fashion brands. By analysing secondary data sources such as corporate reports, websites, and

marketing materials, the research seeks to uncover the dominant themes, discursive strategies, and underlying assumptions that characterise these narratives. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do global fashion brands construct sustainability narratives?
- What themes and patterns emerge in these narratives?
- To what extent do these narratives reflect substantive versus symbolic commitments?

The study is grounded in theoretical perspectives, including legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis. These frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for examining the motivations, strategies, and implications of sustainability narratives. Legitimacy theory highlights the role of narratives in aligning corporate actions with societal expectations (Suchman, 1995), while stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of addressing diverse stakeholder interests (Freeman, 1984). Discourse analysis, on the other hand, enables a critical examination of language and meaning in sustainability communication (Fairclough, 1995).

By integrating these perspectives, the study offers a nuanced understanding of sustainability narratives as both communicative and strategic phenomena. The findings are expected to contribute to academic literature, inform industry practices, and support policy development aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability in the fashion industry.

2. Literature Review

Sustainability has become a defining issue for the fashion industry, driven by increasing awareness of its environmental and social impacts. The concept of sustainability in fashion encompasses three interconnected dimensions: environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Environmental sustainability focuses on reducing the ecological footprint of production processes, including minimising water usage, chemical pollution, and carbon emissions. Social sustainability addresses labour rights, fair wages, and safe working conditions, while economic sustainability involves ensuring long-term profitability without compromising ethical standards (Fletcher, 2014).

The rise of fast fashion has significantly exacerbated sustainability challenges. Fast fashion is characterised by rapid production cycles, low-cost garments, and high consumption rates, leading to increased resource use and waste generation (Bick et al., 2018). The environmental consequences are profound, with the fashion industry accounting for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and significant water consumption (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Additionally, the reliance on low-cost labour in developing countries has raised concerns about worker exploitation and inadequate labour standards.

In response to these challenges, many fashion brands have adopted sustainability initiatives, such as using organic or recycled materials, implementing energy-efficient production processes, and improving supply chain transparency. However, the effectiveness of

these initiatives varies widely, and critics argue that many efforts remain superficial or insufficient to address systemic issues (Joy et al., 2012).

2.1 Corporate Sustainability Communication

Corporate sustainability communication plays a crucial role in shaping stakeholder perceptions and building brand reputation. It involves the disclosure of information related to environmental and social performance, as well as the promotion of sustainability initiatives through various channels, including reports, websites, and marketing campaigns (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Narratives are central to sustainability communication, as they provide a coherent framework for presenting complex information. According to Boje (2008), narratives are not simply stories but are strategic tools that organisations use to construct meaning and influence perceptions. In the fashion industry, sustainability narratives often emphasise innovation, responsibility, and ethical values, creating a positive image of the brand.

However, sustainability communication is inherently selective and may prioritise favourable information while omitting negative aspects. This selective disclosure raises concerns about transparency and accountability. Moreover, the increasing use of digital media has amplified the reach and impact of sustainability narratives, making it easier for brands to shape public discourse.

2.2 Greenwashing and Symbolic Management

Greenwashing is a critical issue in sustainability communication, particularly in industries with significant environmental impacts. Delmas and Burbano (2011) define greenwashing as the practice of misleading stakeholders regarding a company's environmental performance or the environmental benefits of its products. In the fashion industry, greenwashing can take various forms, including vague claims, lack of evidence, and emphasis on minor initiatives while ignoring major impacts.

Symbolic management refers to the use of communication strategies to create a favourable impression without substantive action (Walker & Wan, 2012). In the context of sustainability, symbolic actions may include adopting eco-friendly branding, using sustainability-related terminology, and highlighting isolated initiatives. While these strategies can enhance brand image, they risk undermining credibility if stakeholders perceive them as insincere.

The distinction between substantive and symbolic actions is crucial for evaluating sustainability narratives. Substantive actions involve measurable improvements and transparent reporting, while symbolic actions focus on perception management. Many fashion brands exhibit a combination of both, reflecting the complexity of balancing economic and ethical considerations.

2.3 Stakeholder Theory and Consumer Expectations

Stakeholder theory provides a useful framework for understanding the drivers of

sustainability communication. According to Freeman (1984), organisations must consider the interests of various stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, investors, and communities. In the fashion industry, stakeholder expectations have become increasingly influential in shaping corporate behaviour.

Consumers, in particular, play a significant role in driving sustainability initiatives. Research indicates that consumers are becoming more aware of environmental and social issues and are increasingly willing to support sustainable brands (McNeill & Moore, 2015). However, the attitude-behaviour gap remains a persistent challenge, as consumers may express concern for sustainability but prioritise price and convenience in their purchasing decisions.

Other stakeholders, such as NGOs and regulatory bodies, also exert pressure on fashion brands to improve sustainability practices. These actors often monitor corporate behaviour, publish reports, and advocate for stricter regulations. As a result, brands are compelled to adopt more transparent and accountable practices.

2.4 Discourse and Narrative Construction

Discourse analysis offers valuable insights into how sustainability narratives are constructed and communicated. According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is a form of social practice that shapes and is shaped by power relations and cultural norms. In the context of sustainability, discourse analysis helps uncover the underlying assumptions,

ideologies, and power dynamics embedded in corporate narratives.

Sustainability narratives often rely on specific linguistic and visual strategies, such as the use of positive language, storytelling, and symbolic imagery. These elements contribute to the construction of a particular version of reality, influencing how stakeholders perceive sustainability issues.

For example, the use of terms such as “conscious,” “responsible,” and “eco-friendly” can create a positive impression but may lack precise definitions. Similarly, visual imagery depicting nature, ethical production processes, and community engagement can reinforce sustainability narratives. These strategies highlight the importance of critically examining both the content and form of sustainability communication.

2.5 Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite the growing body of research on sustainability in the fashion industry, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on quantitative assessments of environmental impact or consumer behaviour, with less emphasis on qualitative analysis of narratives and discourse. Second, there is limited research on how sustainability narratives vary across global fashion brands and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the interplay between substantive and symbolic communication remains underexplored. While studies have identified the prevalence of greenwashing, there is a need for more nuanced analysis of how brands balance genuine commitment with strategic communication.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a qualitative exploration of sustainability narratives, focusing on the themes, strategies, and implications of corporate communication in the global fashion industry.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that combines legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis. These perspectives provide complementary lenses for understanding how sustainability narratives are constructed, communicated, and interpreted in the context of global fashion brands. Together, they enable a comprehensive analysis of both the motivations behind sustainability communication and the mechanisms through which meaning is produced and conveyed.

3.1 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy theory posits that organisations operate within a broader social system and must align their activities with societal norms, values, and expectations to maintain legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is defined as a generalised perception that the actions of an entity are appropriate within a socially constructed system of beliefs and values. In the context of the fashion industry, sustainability has become a key societal expectation, driven by growing awareness of environmental degradation and social injustice.

Fashion brands, particularly those operating on a global scale, face increasing scrutiny from stakeholders regarding their environmental and social impacts. As a

result, they engage in various strategies to maintain or restore legitimacy, including the construction of sustainability narratives. These narratives serve as symbolic and communicative tools that signal alignment with societal values, even when actual practices may lag.

Legitimacy can be categorised into pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions (Suchman, 1995). Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the perceived benefits to stakeholders, moral legitimacy relates to ethical evaluations of organisational actions, and cognitive legitimacy refers to the extent to which an organisation is perceived as necessary or inevitable. Sustainability narratives often target all three dimensions by emphasising benefits such as eco-friendly products (pragmatic), ethical labour practices (moral), and alignment with global sustainability goals (cognitive).

However, legitimacy theory also highlights the potential for symbolic actions, where organisations focus on managing perceptions rather than implementing substantive changes. This is particularly relevant in the context of greenwashing, where sustainability narratives may be used to create an impression of responsibility without corresponding operational improvements (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Thus, legitimacy theory provides a critical lens for examining the authenticity of sustainability narratives in the fashion industry.

3.2 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory complements legitimacy theory by emphasising the importance of addressing the interests and expectations of

various stakeholder groups. According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders are individuals or groups that can affect or are affected by an organisation's activities. In the fashion industry, key stakeholders include consumers, employees, suppliers, investors, regulators, and civil society organisations.

Sustainability narratives are often tailored to resonate with different stakeholder groups. For instance, consumers may be targeted with messages about eco-friendly products and ethical sourcing, while investors may be more interested in long-term risk management and regulatory compliance. Similarly, NGOs and advocacy groups may focus on issues such as labour rights and environmental impact.

The increasing influence of stakeholders has led to a shift from one-way communication to more interactive and participatory forms of engagement (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Fashion brands are expected not only to communicate their sustainability efforts but also to engage in dialogue and respond to stakeholder concerns. This has implications for the construction of sustainability narratives, which must be credible, transparent, and responsive.

Stakeholder theory also highlights the potential for conflicting interests among different groups. For example, consumers may demand low prices while also expecting sustainable practices, creating a tension for brands. Similarly, investors may prioritise profitability, which can conflict with the costs associated with sustainable production. Sustainability narratives often attempt to reconcile these tensions by presenting

sustainability as compatible with economic success.

In this study, stakeholder theory provides a framework for analysing how sustainability narratives are shaped by and directed toward different audiences. It also helps to explain why certain themes and messages are emphasised in corporate communication.

3.3 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis offers a critical perspective on how language and communication practices construct social reality. According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is not merely a reflection of reality but actively shapes it by influencing how issues are understood and interpreted. In the context of sustainability, discourse analysis enables a deeper examination of the language, symbols, and narratives used by fashion brands.

Sustainability narratives are inherently discursive, involving the strategic use of language to frame issues and convey meaning. For example, terms such as “sustainable,” “ethical,” and “responsible” are frequently used in corporate communication, yet they often lack precise definitions. This ambiguity allows brands to construct flexible narratives that can appeal to a wide range of stakeholders (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Discourse analysis also considers the role of power and ideology in shaping narratives. Fashion brands, as influential actors, have the ability to shape public discourse on sustainability by defining what it means and how it should be achieved. This can influence consumer perceptions and potentially

obscure alternative perspectives, such as critiques of overconsumption or systemic inequalities.

Furthermore, discourse analysis examines the use of visual and symbolic elements in communication. Images of nature, ethical production processes, and community engagement are commonly used to reinforce sustainability narratives. These visual cues contribute to the construction of a particular image of the brand, often emphasising harmony with the environment and social responsibility.

By applying discourse analysis, this study seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions, values, and power dynamics embedded in sustainability narratives. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed and how narratives influence stakeholder perceptions.

3.4 Integrative Perspective

The integration of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis provides a robust framework for analysing sustainability narratives in global fashion brands. Legitimacy theory explains the motivations behind sustainability communication, stakeholder theory highlights the role of different audiences, and discourse analysis reveals the mechanisms through which narratives are constructed.

Together, these perspectives enable a comprehensive analysis of sustainability narratives as both strategic and communicative phenomena. They also provide a basis for evaluating the extent to which these narratives reflect genuine commitment versus symbolic representation.

This integrative framework is particularly well-suited for qualitative research, as it allows for the exploration of complex and context-dependent phenomena.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena such as sustainability narratives. Qualitative research emphasises understanding meaning, context, and interpretation, making it well-suited for analysing narrative and discursive elements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study follows an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is shaped through language and interaction.

The research is exploratory in nature, aiming to generate insights into how sustainability narratives are constructed and communicated by global fashion brands. Rather than testing hypotheses, the study seeks to identify patterns, themes, and underlying assumptions within the data.

4.1 Data Collection: Secondary Data Sources

The study relies on secondary data, which includes publicly available information produced by fashion brands and external organisations. Secondary data is particularly useful for analysing corporate communication, as it provides access to official narratives and representations (Johnston, 2017).

The data sources include:

- Corporate sustainability reports

- Annual reports and integrated reports
- Official brand websites
- Marketing campaigns and advertisements
- Press releases and public statements
- Third-party reports from NGOs and industry organisations

These sources were selected because they represent the primary channels through which brands communicate their sustainability efforts. The use of multiple sources enhances the richness and diversity of the data, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis.

4.2 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select global fashion brands for analysis. Purposive sampling involves selecting cases that are particularly relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The criteria for selection included:

- Global market presence
- Public engagement with sustainability issues
- Availability of comprehensive sustainability-related data

The sample includes a mix of fast fashion, luxury, and sportswear brands to capture a diverse range of sustainability narratives. This diversity allows for comparative analysis and enhances the generalizability of findings within the qualitative paradigm.

4.3 Data Analysis: Thematic and Discourse Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic

analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process follows six key steps:

- Familiarisation with the data
- Generation of initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

Thematic analysis enables the identification of recurring themes in sustainability narratives, such as transparency, innovation, and ethical practices.

In addition to thematic analysis, discourse analysis is used to examine the language and framing of sustainability narratives. This involves analysing word choice, tone, metaphors, and visual elements to understand how meaning is constructed. The combination of thematic and discourse analysis provides both descriptive and interpretive insights.

4.4 Ensuring Research Quality

To ensure the rigour and credibility of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through the use of multiple data sources, allowing for triangulation. Triangulation involves comparing information from different sources to identify consistencies and discrepancies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear and systematic analytical process, including documentation of coding and theme development. Confirmability was

ensured by grounding interpretations in the data and minimising researcher bias.

Transferability, or the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts, was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and methodology. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisation, it can offer valuable insights that are relevant to similar contexts.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The study relies on publicly available data and does not involve human participants. Therefore, ethical concerns related to confidentiality and informed consent are minimal. However, ethical considerations were taken into account in the interpretation and presentation of data.

The analysis aims to provide a balanced and objective assessment of sustainability narratives, avoiding undue bias or misrepresentation. Care was taken to accurately reflect the content of the data and to acknowledge limitations (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its strengths, the methodology has several limitations. First, the use of secondary data means that the analysis is limited to publicly available information, which may be biased toward positive representations. Brands have an incentive to present themselves favourably, which can affect the accuracy of sustainability narratives.

Second, the qualitative nature of the study limits its ability to establish causal relationships. The findings are interpretive

and context-dependent, which may affect their generalizability.

Finally, the reliance on textual and visual data means that the study does not capture internal organisational processes or stakeholder perceptions directly. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data, such as interviews or surveys.

5. Findings and Analysis

The qualitative analysis of sustainability narratives across global fashion brands reveals a complex and multi-layered landscape in which corporate communication operates simultaneously as a tool for transparency, legitimacy, and strategic positioning. Through thematic and discourse analysis of secondary data sources, including sustainability reports, corporate websites, and marketing materials, several dominant themes and discursive patterns emerge. These findings demonstrate that sustainability narratives are not merely descriptive accounts of corporate practices but are carefully constructed representations that balance stakeholder expectations, reputational concerns, and business imperatives.

5.1 Dominant Themes in Sustainability Narratives

Transparency is consistently emphasised as a cornerstone of sustainability communication. Many global fashion brands highlight their commitment to transparency by publishing detailed sustainability reports, disclosing supply chain information, and adopting traceability tools. This emphasis reflects increasing stakeholder demand for

accountability and aligns with broader institutional pressures for corporate disclosure (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

However, the analysis reveals that transparency is often partial and strategically framed. Brands tend to foreground positive achievements, such as reductions in carbon emissions or the use of sustainable materials, while providing limited information on ongoing challenges or failures. This selective disclosure can be interpreted as a form of impression management, consistent with legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995). By presenting a curated narrative, brands seek to maintain stakeholder trust while minimising reputational risk.

Furthermore, transparency is frequently framed as an ongoing journey rather than a fixed state. Phrases such as “we are working toward greater transparency” or “continuous improvement” are commonly used, allowing brands to acknowledge limitations without undermining their overall narrative. While this framing may reflect genuine efforts, it also provides flexibility in managing stakeholder expectations.

Another dominant theme is the emphasis on circular economy principles and innovation. Brands increasingly promote initiatives such as recycling programs, take-back schemes, and the use of biodegradable or recycled materials. These initiatives are often presented as evidence of a transformative shift toward more sustainable production models.

Innovation is framed as both a solution to environmental challenges and a competitive advantage. The use of advanced

technologies-such as digital supply chain tracking, sustainable fabric development, and waste reduction techniques-is highlighted as a key driver of progress. This narrative aligns with broader discourses of technological optimism, which suggest that innovation can reconcile economic growth with environmental sustainability (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

However, the analysis also indicates that the emphasis on innovation may obscure structural issues within the fashion industry, such as overproduction and overconsumption. By focusing on technological solutions, brands may shift attention away from more fundamental changes that are required to achieve true sustainability (Joy et al., 2012). This reflects a tension between incremental improvements and systemic transformation.

Social sustainability is a critical component of sustainability narratives, particularly in relation to labour practices. Brands frequently emphasise their commitment to fair wages, safe working conditions, and ethical sourcing. These narratives often include references to supplier audits, compliance with international labour standards, and partnerships with non-governmental organisations.

The prominence of labour-related narratives reflects the historical scrutiny faced by the fashion industry regarding worker exploitation and unsafe working conditions. By highlighting improvements in labour practices, brands seek to address these concerns and reinforce their moral legitimacy (Bick et al., 2018).

Despite these efforts, the analysis reveals ongoing inconsistencies between narrative claims and external assessments. Reports from NGOs and investigative journalism often highlight gaps in implementation, suggesting that improvements may be uneven or insufficient. This discrepancy underscores the complexity of managing global supply chains and raises questions about the credibility of sustainability narratives.

A notable feature of sustainability narratives is the emphasis on consumer engagement. Brands increasingly position consumers as active participants in sustainability efforts, encouraging behaviours such as recycling, responsible consumption, and participation in take-back programs. This narrative reflects a shift toward more participatory models of sustainability communication (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

However, this emphasis also involves a subtle redistribution of responsibility. By encouraging consumers to make sustainable choices, brands may shift part of the burden for environmental impact onto individuals. This can be seen as a strategic move to balance corporate accountability with consumer agency.

While consumer engagement is important, the analysis suggests that this narrative may downplay the structural role of corporations in driving unsustainable practices. The focus on individual behaviour risks obscuring the need for systemic change within the industry.

5.2 Discursive Strategies in Sustainability Narratives

Storytelling is a central strategy in sustainability narratives. Brands often use

narratives that highlight individual stories, such as those of artisans, factory workers, or communities benefiting from sustainability initiatives. These stories are designed to create emotional connections and enhance the perceived authenticity of the brand.

Emotional framing is particularly effective in engaging consumers, as it humanises abstract sustainability issues. However, it can also serve to simplify complex problems and divert attention from broader systemic challenges (Boje, 2008).

The use of ambiguous language is a recurring feature of sustainability narratives. Terms such as “eco-friendly,” “green,” and “responsible” are widely used but often lack clear definitions. This ambiguity allows brands to construct flexible narratives that can appeal to diverse audiences (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

While such language can enhance marketing appeal, it also raises concerns about transparency and accountability. The lack of standardised definitions makes it difficult for stakeholders to evaluate the validity of sustainability claims.

Visual elements play a significant role in reinforcing sustainability narratives. Images of natural landscapes, ethical production processes, and community engagement are commonly used to create a perception of environmental and social responsibility.

These visual cues contribute to what can be described as the “aestheticisation” of sustainability, where environmental values are communicated through visual appeal. While effective in shaping perceptions, this

strategy may also contribute to superficial understandings of sustainability.

5.3 Substantive versus Symbolic Commitments

The analysis reveals a continuum between substantive and symbolic sustainability practices. Substantive commitments involve measurable actions, such as reducing emissions, improving labour conditions, and adopting sustainable materials. Symbolic commitments, on the other hand, focus on communication and image management.

Many brands exhibit a hybrid approach, combining substantive initiatives with symbolic communication strategies. This reflects the dual pressures of achieving sustainability goals while maintaining competitiveness and profitability (Walker & Wan, 2012).

The distinction between substantive and symbolic actions is not always clear-cut, as communication is an integral part of sustainability efforts. However, the findings suggest that greater emphasis on measurable outcomes and independent verification is necessary to enhance credibility.

5.4 Greenwashing and Credibility Challenges

Greenwashing emerges as a significant concern in the analysis. Instances of exaggerated claims, selective disclosure, and lack of evidence are evident across multiple brands. These practices undermine trust and highlight the need for greater regulation and standardisation in sustainability reporting (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The increasing scrutiny from stakeholders, including consumers and NGOs, has led to greater awareness of greenwashing. As a result, brands face growing pressure to ensure that their sustainability narratives are supported by substantive actions.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the construction and implications of sustainability narratives in global fashion brands. By integrating perspectives from legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis, the discussion highlights the strategic, communicative, and ideological dimensions of sustainability narratives.

6.1 Sustainability Narratives as Instruments of Legitimacy

The analysis confirms that sustainability narratives function as key instruments for maintaining organisational legitimacy. In an era of heightened environmental and social awareness, fashion brands must demonstrate alignment with societal values to sustain their operations and reputation. Sustainability narratives enable brands to signal this alignment, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

However, the findings also suggest that legitimacy is often pursued through symbolic means. While many brands have implemented substantive sustainability initiatives, the emphasis on communication and image management indicates that legitimacy is not solely based on actual performance. This raises important questions about the authenticity of sustainability

narratives and the extent to which they reflect genuine commitment.

The concept of “legitimacy gaps” is particularly relevant in this context. When there is a discrepancy between stakeholder expectations and organisational practices, brands may use sustainability narratives to bridge this gap. However, if these narratives are perceived as insincere or misleading, they may exacerbate rather than resolve legitimacy challenges.

6.2 Stakeholder Pressures and Strategic Communication

The findings highlight the central role of stakeholders in shaping sustainability narratives. Fashion brands operate in a complex environment where multiple stakeholders exert influence, including consumers, investors, regulators, and civil society organisations. Each of these groups has distinct expectations, which must be addressed through targeted communication strategies (Freeman, 1984).

Sustainability narratives are thus inherently strategic, designed to appeal to different audiences. For example, narratives emphasising innovation and efficiency may resonate with investors, while those focusing on ethical labour practices may appeal to consumers and advocacy groups. This multiplicity of audiences contributes to the diversity and complexity of sustainability narratives.

At the same time, stakeholder expectations can be contradictory. The demand for low-cost fashion often conflicts with the costs associated with sustainable production. Sustainability narratives attempt to reconcile

these tensions by presenting sustainability as compatible with affordability and profitability. However, this reconciliation may not always be achievable in practice.

6.3 The Role of Discourse in Shaping Sustainability

Discourse analysis reveals that sustainability narratives are not neutral representations but are actively constructed through language and symbolism. The use of positive language, storytelling, and visual imagery shapes how sustainability is understood and evaluated by stakeholders (Fairclough, 1995).

One of the key findings is the prevalence of ambiguous and flexible language, which allows brands to construct broad and appealing narratives. While this flexibility can be advantageous from a marketing perspective, it also creates challenges for accountability. Without clear definitions and standards, it becomes difficult to assess the validity of sustainability claims.

Moreover, discourse plays a role in shaping the boundaries of what is considered sustainable. By emphasising certain aspects, such as recycling or eco-friendly materials, brands may marginalise other important issues, such as overconsumption or systemic inequality. This selective framing reflects underlying power dynamics, as brands have the ability to influence public discourse on sustainability.

6.4 Greenwashing and the Crisis of Trust

The findings underscore the persistent challenge of greenwashing in the fashion industry. Despite increased awareness and

scrutiny, misleading sustainability claims remain prevalent. This has significant implications for stakeholder trust, as consumers and other stakeholders may become sceptical of corporate communication (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The crisis of trust associated with greenwashing highlights the need for greater transparency, standardisation, and accountability. Independent verification, standardised reporting frameworks, and regulatory oversight are essential for ensuring the credibility of sustainability narratives.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that not all instances of inconsistency are intentional. The complexity of global supply chains and the evolving nature of sustainability practices can make it challenging for brands to fully align their narratives with their actions. This suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of greenwashing that considers both intentional and unintentional discrepancies.

6.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

The study contributes to theoretical understanding by integrating multiple perspectives to analyse sustainability narratives. It demonstrates the value of combining legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis to capture the multifaceted nature of corporate communication.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of aligning sustainability narratives with substantive actions. Brands must move beyond symbolic

communication and prioritise measurable outcomes and transparency. This is essential for building trust and achieving long-term sustainability goals.

For policymakers, the study underscores the need for clearer guidelines and standards for sustainability reporting. Regulatory frameworks can play a crucial role in reducing ambiguity and preventing greenwashing.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive qualitative exploration of sustainability narratives in global fashion brands, highlighting the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of corporate sustainability communication. By integrating legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and discourse analysis, the research demonstrates that sustainability narratives function not only as representations of corporate practices but also as strategic tools for managing perceptions and maintaining legitimacy.

The findings indicate that global fashion brands consistently emphasise key themes such as transparency, circular economy practices, ethical labour standards, and consumer engagement. These themes reflect evolving stakeholder expectations and the increasing importance of sustainability in shaping brand identity. However, the analysis also reveals that sustainability narratives are frequently characterised by selective disclosure, ambiguous language, and symbolic representation. Such practices can create a gap between communicated

intentions and actual performance, raising concerns about authenticity and credibility.

The prevalence of greenwashing further underscores the challenges associated with sustainability communication in the fashion industry. While some brands demonstrate genuine commitment through measurable actions and transparent reporting, others rely more heavily on impression management strategies. This duality highlights the tension between the economic imperatives of the fashion industry and the ethical demands of sustainability.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sustainability narratives are shaped by the interplay of legitimacy-seeking behaviour, stakeholder pressures, and discursive practices. It emphasises that sustainability communication cannot be fully understood without considering both its strategic motivations and its linguistic and symbolic construction.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that fashion brands must prioritise alignment between narrative and practice to build and maintain stakeholder trust. Greater transparency, standardised reporting frameworks, and independent verification mechanisms are essential for enhancing credibility. Policymakers and industry regulators also have a critical role to play in establishing clear guidelines to reduce ambiguity and prevent misleading claims.

In conclusion, sustainability narratives in the global fashion industry represent a dynamic and evolving field of inquiry. While progress has been made, significant challenges remain

in ensuring that these narratives reflect genuine and meaningful change. Future research should further investigate the impact of sustainability narratives on consumer behaviour and explore cross-cultural variations in sustainability communication.

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